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ABSTRACT

A recent California task force report on middle grade education, "Caught in the Middle," recommends that the master schedule provide for extended time blocks for core curriculum courses. Several goals of middle school education will be fulfilled by the program which is often called "core block" or "block time." The goals include (1) transition; (2) student guidance; (3) belonging; (4) interdisciplinary focus; (5) teacher collegiality and professionalism; (6) variety of instructional methods; and (7) access to key learning experiences. The task force report recommends a "humanities" core for the middle school curriculum. Collaborative team planning that evolves into interdisciplinary team teaching describes the ideal teacher assignments presented in the paper. The "house" plan is described as a possible option for providing transition from the self-contained elementary classroom to the multiteacher, departmentalized mode of high school. Other features of the "core block" program are also discussed: homeroom/student advisory schedule, exploratory offerings, electives, small school size, facilities, and flexible-modular scheduling. Implementation of the "block time" program calls for a pilot project to aid in the transition process. Appended are 33 references. (SI)

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PHILOSOPHY INTO PRACTICE

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SCHEDULING THE MIDDLE LEVEL SCHOOL:

PHILOSOPHY INTO PRACTICE

by

Sara Lake

April, 1988

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The California League of Middle Schools is an association of people who are interested in furthering the growth and development of middle schools and middle school concepts. The association is composed of parents, teachers, school and district administrators, State Department of Education officials, and others with an interest in the education of early adolescents.

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The recent California task force report on middle grade education, Caught in the Middle, calls for a master school schedule whose "dominant theme is flexibility." While not specifically requiring use of flexible-modular scheduling, the task force report insists that, among other things, the master schedule should provide for: extended time blocks for core curriculum courses (preferably interdisciplinary); exploratory courses; options for team, collaborative, and self-contained teaching; teacher planning time; equal access of all students to all instructional programs; student advisory programs and/or homerooms; varied lengths of course time to accommodate pre-defined learning goals (e.g., longer periods for laboratory courses); and innovation and experimentation with varied time configurations.[1]

For junior high or middle schools operating on a traditional, departmentalized schedule, the first change is likely to be the development of an extended-time, interdisciplinary core course. Why does the state task force recommend this plan? Because this type of program, often called a "core block" or "block time" plan, fulfills many of the goals of exemplary middle school education, most specifically:

- o Transition The core block retains some of the flavor of the self-contained elementary classroom, giving students, especially sixth graders, extended time with one teacher or teaching team. This provides a transition from the elementary-style classroom to the departmentalized high school, with its multiple teachers and movement between classes.
- o Student Guidance The extended-period class can serve as a "home" for students. Homeroom and student advisory are often part of the core block. A block time plan enhances the teacher's role as counselor and guide and gives each middle grade student closer contact

with a significant adult.

- o Belonging A two-year study of a block time plan in an Edmonton, Alberta, junior high found that students felt closer to their teachers and classmates. Their attitudes toward school and toward themselves as learners improved. Teachers also appreciated closer contact with their pupils and felt that it made class management easier.[2]

- o Interdisciplinary Focus Interdisciplinary coursework helps students to apply skills across disciplines and to appreciate the interrelatedness of subjects. Caught in the Middle recognizes the complexity of subject integration, but recommends that, at minimum, the school provide "an interdisciplinary reading/literature/language arts and/or history/geography core."[3] A core block includes two or more subjects taught to the same group of students by a single teacher or a team, in an extended time block of two or more standard class periods. Within this period, the subjects may be taught separately, but the intent is that they be correlated or, ideally, taught in a fully integrated manner. This reduces overlap between subjects and provides more continuity.

- o Teacher Collegiality and Professionalism Interdisciplinary team teaching in a core block requires teacher collaboration, ending the isolation of the single-subject classroom. Whether the core block is taught by a single teacher or a team, the teacher(s) take full responsibility for scheduling classwork within the block.

- o Variety of Instructional Methods Time is available for an expanded teaching repertoire, e.g., use of films, student-teacher planning, active learning methods, and other techniques that may be more difficult in a traditional 45-minute class period. It is easier to

schedule outside resources or activities, such as library visits or field trips.[4]

- o Access A heterogeneously-grouped core curriculum provides every student with access to the same key learning experiences. Special enrichment and remediation can be added in another part of the school day.

What will it take to move to an interdisciplinary core from a totally departmentalized structure? Each school must plan the change on its own, deciding which subjects to include in the core and what philosophical thrusts will drive the program. Characteristics of the staff, the student body, and the school plant will color these decisions.

While a school may choose to design its program from scratch, it may also find ideas and guidance in four innovations popular in the 1960s: core curriculum, team teaching, the house plan, and flexible-modular scheduling. Older reports on these techniques can offer insights on some of the questions a school must ask, when it considers changing to California's middle grade education model.

What Subjects Should Be Included in an Interdisciplinary Core?

Caught in the Middle recommends a "humanities" core as the minimum. Since at least as far back as 1958, English language arts with social studies has been the most popular mix.[5] Science and mathematics combinations have not been nearly so common, although one or the other has sometimes been included with the humanities in a core block. Many groupings are possible. For example, Mary Compton proposes that the entire middle school curriculum be integrated into three "cores": Humanities (language, music, art, and social studies), Technology (science, industrial arts, mathematics, and home living),

and Personal Studies (physical education, health, exploratory experiences, and student activities).[6]

Hansen and Hearn define a core curriculum as one based on student problem-solving, in which "there are no commitments to any subject or content areas. Student-selected topics are frequently utilized for course content, and subject matter from any area is brought in as it may be used to assist in solving the problems selected."[7] If interdisciplinary, problem-centered content is an ideal, it raises distinct problems in practice. One is our traditional affection for the various academic disciplines. High school requirements, which influence middle grade offerings, are still usually stated as units in science, mathematics, English, etc. Fitting cross-discipline courses into a discipline-specific structure can be troublesome. Subject specialists also argue that each discipline has a methodology of its own and that it is important for students to learn these different modes of thought and inquiry. True interdisciplinary teaching also requires an extremely rich information base, for students will be seeking information on an almost unlimited range of topics. But the chief obstacle is the lack of teachers experienced in teaching an interdisciplinary core curriculum: this curriculum design did not figure in the training of most of today's professionals. Legally, many are restricted by single-subject credentials.

The philosophy articulated by the National Association for Core Curriculum, Inc. closely matches that for the middle school, in that it is focused on student interests and needs; seeks to promote student decision-making; uses various learning strategies; and makes the teacher's role one of advisor, facilitator, and friend. The Association asserts that, far from imposing impossible demands on educators, the "core" philosophy can be achieved under a wide variety of time, space, and personnel arrangements.[8]

How Should Teachers Be Assigned to the Core Block?

Teachers with multi-subject elementary credentials can teach interdisciplinary core blocks by themselves, and so will make a school's assignment task much easier. One junior high, which absorbed both sixth grade students and their teachers from an elementary school, was able to assign each of these teachers to an English/social studies/homeroom core block, and allow each to chose his or her strongest subject (reading, math, or science) for the balance of the instructional day.[9]

If individuals with multi-subject credentials are not available, the most practical solution is to have two or more subject teachers pool their expertise to share the core course and a common group of students. Collaborative planning is a must and physical proximity is very helpful, but team teaching need not necessarily follow. The team could divide the instructional period, to provide more instructional flexibility while keeping within their subject specialities. For example, the social studies teacher might take the bulk of the joint period one day for a special project, while the English teacher takes more time another day.

The ideal, of course, is that collaborative team planning will evolve into interdisciplinary team teaching. The first step may come in the form of "correlation." For example, students studying the Westward Movement in social studies would read novels in English about that historical period. They could apply their English language arts skills to writing papers on social studies topics.[10] Alternatively, a team might agree on general concepts that they will teach simultaneously in their subject classes, for example, while "measurement" is the focus in mathematics, the English teacher could use stories dealing with time and the social studies teacher could stress map skills.[11]

Teaming may require a psychological adjustment for some teachers: they may not be good at a particular teaching method (e.g., small group work) and fear having to use it, or they may be nervous about being observed by other professionals. Used to the isolation and autonomy of "their" classroom, some may lack the skills or desire for professional collaboration and joint planning.[12] Teams formed of uncommitted or unprepared teachers risk problems of internal conflict and failure to cooperate. Staff development and ongoing assistance must be offered to help teachers master the logistics and methods of interdisciplinary teamwork.

The first, absolutely essential, step is collaborative team planning, for the team is responsible for determining all activities within its block of time. A common planning period for each team must be scheduled into the school day. It might, for example, occur while the team's group of students is taking physical education. (Cross-team meetings of subject specialists are also important, but may have to take place after school, for it is unlikely that members from all the different core teams will have common free time during the day.)[13]

Cooperative planning and decision-making offer powerful benefits to teachers. In their 1985 survey of 130 exemplary middle schools, Paul George and Lynn Oldaker found that "previously-isolated instructors became team members and developed the same sense of belonging and camaraderie they hoped to instill in their students."[14] Hansen and Hearn suggests that close work with other professionals enlivens the teaching act, allows teachers to vary instructional tactics, and permits them to exploit their individual teaching strengths. Hansen and Hearn also see teaming as an excellent way to induct novice teachers.[15] Erb's 1986 study of 200 teachers with 1 to 16 years' experience in team teaching, concluded that "the interdisciplinary team is a powerful organizational arrangement for improving the professional worklife of

many middle school teachers." He found that:

- Team teachers not only exert professional control in their classrooms, they are more involved in school-wide decision-making.
- They value the camaraderie and emotional support their teammates provide.
- Working together, a team has more eyes to spot learning problems and more resources for addressing them.
- Teaming improves communication not only within the team, but with the administration, with support personnel, and with parents.
- More communication occurs directly; less paper is passed.

Teachers, Erb concludes, "nearly universally, report greater satisfaction with the conditions of teaching when they are organized into interdisciplinary teams."[16]

Team assignments will naturally depend on arranging the proper mix of subject expertise and teaching strengths, but all authors stress that the personal qualities of the team members are equally important. Commitment to the process and willingness to share are vital. Most authors recommend that teams be balanced, members having similar educational philosophies, but enough variety of experience, personality, and technique to spark creative interchange. To the extent possible, team members should probably select each other and participate in the selection of new members, when vacancies occur.

Team teaching may require more personnel, particularly clerical help for the individual teams. In the most elaborate house plans, specialists, and even administrators, may be assigned to individual teams or houses. Unless a school is large enough to already employ multiple specialists, more personnel expense may be entailed.

How Should Students Be Assigned to Core Blocks?

Ability-grouped student core classes are possible, of course, but the concept of equal access to common learning suggests that heterogeneous grouping should be used. Edmonton helped its slower students function effectively in the core block by providing a Differentiated Support Option: special tutoring scheduled twice weekly outside the core period.[17]

What Grades Should Be Included?

A major rationale for the extended-time core block is that it eases students' transition from the self-contained elementary classroom to the multi-teacher, departmentalized mode they will find in high school. When this rationale predominates, the core block is likely to be limited to grade 6, or to take up less time in grades 7 and 8. Of course, other options are possible for providing transition; for example, Poway City USD has offered its sixth graders self-contained classes, multi-age continuous progress, and team teaching.[18]

But the core block is also designed to promote students' sense of belonging, their close relationship with a concerned teacher, and their personalized guidance. Middle schoolers of all grades benefit from this. One way to provide it is the house plan.

The house plan creates schools-within-a-school: separate faculties (sometimes with their own administration and support services) for specific groups of students. Each house occupies a section of the school building (perhaps a separate floor or wing), but all houses share the school's specialized facilities: science labs, music rooms, gym, cafeteria. There is usually a school-wide student activities program.

The house plan is most frequently used to bring large schools (1000 or

more students) down to more human proportions (often three houses of about 300), but almost any school may use a house plan. In 1983, Renne Intermediate School in Oregon had only 425 students, yet divided them into three separate houses.[19]

Houses may be built within or across grades. In 1975, Kunsmiller Junior High School, near Denver, created within-grade houses on separate floors of its building. The school had been experiencing racial conflicts under court-ordered busing. The house plan reduced traffic and served to separate older from younger students: assaults and extortions dropped 76%.[20]

Multi-grade houses offer continuity and continuous monitoring. Students and teachers stay together for all three years. Older students welcome and orient new students to the house, providing them with a ready-made "family." Over three years of close association, each teacher becomes familiar with each student and can provide strong, consistent guidance.[21]

Whatever the plan, students tend to develop strong loyalty to their house, but Fogg and Diamond assert that this supports, rather than undermines, loyalty to the school as a whole.[22] The house provides a comfortable base of familiar faces, while wider opportunities come through the mixing of houses in the cafeteria, gym, arts classes, and the student activities program.

Administratively, there may be trade-offs in the house plan. In the late 1960s, Bernard Welch found that a house plan allowed 1200 students to be housed in a facility designed for 900, but that it required four extra teachers.[23]

When Should Homeroom/Student Advisory Be Scheduled?

The common practice seems to be to include homeroom and/or advisory as part of the core block. The core teacher, who is with the student longest each day, is a convenient choice for student adviser. But homeroom might also

be scheduled for first period, to handle announcements and administrative details. The "guidance" or "student advisory" class, which focuses on student development, may be part of homeroom or separate. Part of that decision may rest on identifying the teachers able to take on, or willing to be trained in, the adviser role.

There is an advantage to having each student stay with the same teacher-adviser over all three years; it allows the adviser to really know the child and to monitor progress over a long period. If the adviser is also one of the child's teachers, s/he has an ongoing opportunity to see the child "in action." But unless every teacher-adviser regularly teaches all three grades, it may not be possible to place all advisees in their advisors' classes.

What about Exploratory Offerings, Electives, and Activities?

Lounsbury and Vars estimate that the core block (depending on the subjects included) will take up one-fourth to one-half of the student's day. The rest will be devoted to other required courses, electives, and student activities, any or all of which may be correlated to the activities of the core class.[24]

The other required courses, often math and science, are as central a part of the schedule as the core block, but may offer more options for scheduling throughout the school day. One alternative might be a common time assignment, for example, several math classes meeting during second period. This would allow teachers to flexibly group their students across classes in order to better meet individual needs.

The major point in scheduling electives, exploratory experiences, and student activities seems to be insuring that they don't interfere with the core and required courses. Beyond that, many schemes might be designed. For

example, both physical education and laboratory science are active classes that require preparation and cleanup and, therefore, benefit from a longer class period. They might meet in the same extended period on alternate days. Exploratory minicourses can vary in length from a week to a month to a trimester; as long as they are set within a distinct period, they won't affect the rest of the school day.

Placing student activities after school relieves scheduling problems, but some students may be not be able to participate, unless special transportation is provided. Renne Intermediate School kept activities within the school day, creating a 70-minute midday activities period for lunch, recreation, special activities, elective minicourses, and homeroom and guidance.[25]

Does Small School Size Impose Limitations?

Educators voice concern that a small school cannot offer an adequate schedule of courses to meet all students' core and enrichment learning needs. Certainly, spreading a very small faculty across a common core curriculum and a range of electives and activities is an extremely complex problem--one that cannot be adequately addressed in this short monograph.

But small school scheduling problems were extensively studied in the 1950s and 1960s, and the resulting reports indicate that small secondary schools can make use of a wide range of scheduling plans and can find ways to offer comprehensive curricula. Two reports, Scheduling for Flexibility: A Manual for Administrators of Small Schools (1971) and Guidebook on Flexible Scheduling (1959) by the Catskill Area Project in Small School Design, address the many details of small school schedule design and may be helpful to educators facing the same issue today.[26]

What About Facilities?

In the 1960s, some schools were specifically designed to accommodate teaching teams, variations in class size (large group, small group, and tutorials), and even house plans. Core block classes can easily take place in standard classrooms, but old, traditional buildings may inhibit some teaching activities. For example, large group lectures may be difficult if the gym or cafeteria are the only rooms available. In addition, office space must be found for teacher planning periods.

Limited facilities must be realistically assessed, but the school's educational philosophy and preferred teaching styles--not its structural limitations--should drive its program. Educators are good at working around physical limitations--they've always had to be.

What Kind of Schedule Should Be Used?

Caught in the Middle recommends a six- or seven-period day, but the past 20 years has brought forth a bewildering array of scheduling options--traditional to flex-mod, 4 to 32 daily periods--that individual schools have used to successfully present their middle school program.[27] The flexible-modular schedule naturally facilitates the idea of fitting time to instruction, instead of squeezing instruction to fit arbitrary time slots. Specific timelines can be designed for lab classes, lectures, or small group work, and these will be reflected in the master schedule. But the core block can be fit easily into a traditional schedule; after all, to the master schedule, it is simply a string of class periods.

In their guidebook on secondary school scheduling, Dempsey and Traverso insist that a successful master schedule is based on a balance of curricular objectives, student course requests, and faculty strengths and preferences.

A school must first decide what it wants its students to know and how it will teach these things. "The selection of a scheduling model must be based upon what is best for student learning. . . . the choice of a schedule should flow naturally from the philosophy of the school and the community. . . . There is no ideal schedule."[28] To help schools make a selection, their guidebook offers details on many schedule models, as well as step-by-step instructions for building a master school schedule.

The essential features of a schedule that operationalizes middle school philosophy lie in the extended-time core block and the common planning period that promotes teacher collaboration. Together these features lead toward some of the main themes of middle grade education: transition, student guidance, belonging, interdisciplinary focus, teacher collegiality and professionalism, variety of instructional methods, and equal access. John H. Lounsbury insists that, "In my opinion, a true middle school cannot operate on a departmentalized schedule. Ultimately, the success of the middle school movement will probably depend on its ability to break the stranglehold of the subject-class-teacher arrangement for organizing instruction."[29]

Because each school is unique in terms of its educational goals, staff qualifications, student needs, and facilities, each will have to make its own decisions on how to operationalize the philosophical premises of middle grade education, and in what balance. As has been noted throughout, some of the classic innovations of the 1960s offer lessons on key features of the current movement. For example, the house plan seems particularly good at promoting students' sense of belonging, particularly in a large school; team teaching encourages teacher collegiality; flexible-modular scheduling adapts the master schedule to a greater variety of instructional methods. Literature on these innovations is available in education libraries and through the ERIC (Educational Resources Information Center) database that is available in many

academic libraries and regional education agencies.

Implementation

As with any educational change, rescheduling for middle grade education requires that all constituents (teachers, administrators, students, parents) be consulted in planning and given the opportunity to "buy in." The advantages of the new plan can be explained to the community, with convincing support provided by the educational research literature, including the references given at the end of this paper. Review of the school's philosophy, course offerings, teacher assignments, and organizational patterns will all precede selection of a scheduling model and creation of the master schedule.

Miracles will not occur overnight. Donald Overly suggests that, in an older school with a traditional staff and community, the transition to a flexible schedule might take years. "Perhaps as few as 30% will use time creatively the first year."[30] Dempsey and Traverso agree that moving to flexible-modular scheduling takes a minimum of two years of preparation.[31]

A first step might be a pilot project. The philosophy of transition suggests that grade 6 (or the lowest grade) would be the logical choice for an initial core block, a teaching team, or a house plan.

Edmonton re-evaluated its Block Plan after the second year, on the assumption that there would be a large Hawthorne effect in first year findings. It found that teachers shared information on students, but that sharing on curriculum matters was not easily achieved and that "no evidence suggests that major instructional changes occurred." But the grouping of subjects in core periods was leading to "a curriculum that is more application oriented and more useful."[32]

David Beggs notes that "team teaching is a theme with infinite

variations."[33] The key is cooperation and shared decision-making. If the school schedule can be altered to bring teachers together and they are empowered to determine instruction in an extended-time core block, evolution is likely to take over: each team and each school will develop its own version of the middle school model, based on its unique goals, talents, and needs.

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